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Review of Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, *Issac Abravanel on Miracles, Creation, Prophecy and Evil: The Tension Between Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Biblical Commentary*

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Alfredo Fabio Borodowski, *Isaac Abravanel on Miracles, Creation, Prophecy and Evil: The Tension Between Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Biblical Commentary* (Studies in Biblical Literature 53; New York: Peter Lang, 2003). Pp. xvi + 241. Cloth, $US69.95. ISBN 0-8204-6236-5.

The volume under review is an attempt "to determine the nature of the relationship between Abravanel's[1] philosophical treatise, *Mifa'lot Elohim*, and his exegetical corpora" (1) concentrating on the examination in both of miracles. Their frequent occurrence in the Bible makes miracles an obvious topic of exegesis, while their apparently unnatural aspect demands a philosophical explanation. For Abravanel, "Miracles constitute an actual testimony to the possibility of the greatest unnatural act: creation" (79), and *Mifa'lot Elohim* is devoted to a definitive proof of creation *ex nihilo.*

Borodowski presents a clear review of the nature of miracles as explained by Maimonides and Gersonides; the latter is presented as Abravanel's main antagonist in his work. (Indeed, one finds in Abravanel's discussion of the Tabernacle in his Exodus commentary that he declines to reply to Gersonides' "dreams" about what the Tabernacle represents, except to say that he has completely misunderstood the Torah's intent.) For Gersonides, miracles are the result of "the activation of special natural laws, or being preordained to occur since creation at a particular time and place" (91), and do not share a common nature with creation.

Abravanel, who does view miracles as sharing in the essential nature of the original creation, rejects their predetermined nature, seeing contingency as an essential attribute of miracles. His arguments against miracles having been fixed within nature since creation take seven forms, as Borodowski presents them:

1. **Theory of the Preservation of Divine Justice: Since humans have free will, it is necessary to preserve divine justice that miracles be a response to actual behavior as it happens.**

2. **Theory of the Prophetic Proof: If such miracles as turning Moses' hand into snowy scales were mechanical, they could not serve as prophetic proofs. Again, they must be an immediate response to the situation.**

3. **Rejection from the Non-Existence of Universals: Where in the nature of fire could (e.g.) the miracle of the fire that did not consume Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah have been inscribed?**

4. **Rejection from the Perpetual Character of Nature: The world is perfect as created and can only be altered (at God's whim) to save the chosen people or punish the wicked. Pre-programmed miracles would have to be regarded as "patches" meant to repair a world that was not quite what it should be.**

5. **Rejection from the Literal Understanding of the Scriptures: To choose one example, Num 22:28, "Then the Lord opened the ass's mouth," indicates direct divine intervention and ought**

to be taken as it stands. (Biblical quotations, here and below, are given in the translation of the New Jewish Publication Society version.)

6. **Rejection from a Reasonable Interpretation of the Rabbinical Sources: It is absurd to think (as a midrash suggests in Genesis Rabbah 5:5) that God literally established an agreement with water or earth to perform such-and-such a miracle at a stated moment in later history.**

7. **Rejection from Other Rabbinical Sources: According to Numbers Rabbah, when in Num 16:30 God "brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth" and swallows Korah and his followers, the nature of miracles is clearly explained.**

A further dispute between Abravanel and Gersonides centers on the nature of the human channel through which miracles are actuated. For the latter, the greater the prophet, the greater the miracle; this demands that he re-interpret the incident in Joshua 10 when Joshua makes the sun and moon stand still, a miracle in a much higher sphere than any that Moses ever achieved. "Gersonides explains that the real miracle was that the Israelite victory occurred in such a short time that the sun and moon appeared not to have moved" (178). But Abravanel detaches the level of prophecy completely from the level of miracles.

Here is where the comparison of philosophy with exegesis proves interesting. According to Borodowski, Abravanel's exegetical analysis of Moses' prophetic superiority is almost the twin of that presented in the *Mifa'lot*, except that it contains an additional theory that directly *opposes* the *Mifa'lot*! For he demonstrates in his commentary that Moses' miracles were indeed superior, and that he indeed (like Joshua) produced miracles in the heavenly domain. For Abravanel, Borodowski concludes, "Moses' superiority with respect to miracles belongs to a type logically and causally independent from his superiority in prophecy.... [It] is the logical result of the historical circumstances in combination with prophetic readiness" (206). Why, then, does Abravanel analyze these two factors conjointly? The answer is found in Deut 34:10-11, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the Lord singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents that the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt." The apparent connection between Moses' singularity and the "signs and portents" that he was sent to display demands an exegetical solution, but did not call for similar treatment in the philosophical work.

As a reader with little formal training in medieval Jewish philosophy, I found Borodowski's discussion of the treatment of miracles and creation both interesting and clear. I cannot speak for specialists in the field, but I found his conclusions plausible: 1 Abravanel wrote his exegesis for the philosophically informed reader; 2 in the Middle Ages, philosophy and exegesis were inseparable; 3 "the usual view of Abravanel as an unoriginal exegete whose contribution is limited to the politico-historical arena is untenable" (217). Perhaps it is Abravanel's notorious prolixity that has tainted his reputation. I found Borodowski's admiration for him justified.

Note: Aside from such idiosyncrasies as hyphenating the Latin phrase *ex-nihilo* (passim) and an inexplicable reference to *Avodah Zarah* II,25:1 (198), there are some serious difficulties with the footnotes, bibliography, and index, which do not serve to help the reader as readily as might be hoped.

Neither "Netanyahu" (9 n. 25) nor "Ruiz" (14 n. 41) is listed in the bibliography. There is an index entry for "Netanyahu, Benzion," and a second for "Netanyahu," which points (among other places) to 221, where he is not found; the index entry for Ruiz *does* point you to the footnote where his book is referenced, though not to any other places in this book where it is mentioned.

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[1] I will use the author's spelling of the name in this review; unlike Eric Lawee, who chose in his recent book to call the philosopher/exegete Abarbanel, Borodowski does not explain his choice.